

Message Text

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ACTION AF-04

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 NSC-05 PM-03 SP-02 INR-05

CIAE-00 NSAE-00 HA-01 /035 W

-----130050 090654Z /11

R 081000Z JUN 78

FM AMEMBASSY BANGUI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 291

INFO AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN

AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE

AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE

AMEMBASSY KINSHASA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGUI 1280

LIMDIS

TEHRAN FOR FAIRCHILD

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PEPR.; 08, , CT, US

SUBJ: AMBASSADOR'S RETROSPECTIVE PART 1: BOKASSA -- EMPEROR
AND EGOIST

1. THE DOMINANT REALITY IN CENTRAL AFRICA IS ITS RULER, JEAN BEDEL BOKASSA, NOW BOKASSA I. SEEN FROM THE OUTSIDE, HE APPEARS EITHER A BUFFOON, FLAUNTING HIS IMPERIAL AMBITIONS BEFORE THE WORLD, OR A BLOODY DICTATOR CUTTING OFF THE EARS OF THIEVES AND BEATING INNOCENT JOURNALISTS. HAVING WORKED WITH HIM FOR OVER TWO YEARS, BOKASSA STRIKES ME AS A MORE COMPLEX MAN, SUBSTANTIALLY DIFFERENT FROM THESE SIMPLE STEREOTYPES. HE IS, OF COURSE, A TYRANT WHO HAS ABSOLUTE SWAY OVER HIS PEOPLE AND COUNTRY. HE CAN BE CRUEL. HE IS RUTHLESS WHEN THWARTED. HE IS A CONSUMMATE COMEDIAN AND A MASTER OF THEATRICAL EFFECT.

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WHILE HE CAN BE CAPRICIOUS AND UNSTABLE, HE CAN ALSO BE CALCULATING, CHARMING AND INTELLIGENT. HE IS CAPABLE NOT ONLY OF VIOLENT RAGES BUT ALSO OF EXTRAORDINARY GENEROSITY. HE IS A MAN FOR WHOM THE EXERCISE OF POWER IS ALMOST INSTINCTIVE AND WHOSE POLITICAL SKILLS HAVE MADE HIM ONE OF THE SENIOR HEADS OF STATE ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT.

2. THE ESSENTIAL FACT ABOUT BOKASSA IS THAT HE IS NOT A FORWARD LOOKING MAN. FOR HIM THE PAST IS PRESENT. IT IS NOT MERELY THAT HE HAS DRESSED HIS EMPIRE IN NAPOLEONIC COSTUME, FABRICATED A PHARAONIC PEDIGREE FOR HIS FAMILY AND DEVELOPED A BYZANTINE PROTOCOL FOR HIS COURT; MORE PROFOUNDLY HE IS MARKED BY THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE AND BY AN ANCIENT, IF NOW DISTORTED, TRADITION OF AFRICAN CHIEFTAINSHIP.

3. BOKASSA, AFTER ALL, SPENT MOST OF HIS EARLY ADULT YEARS AS A FRENCH SOLDIER AND OFFICER. HE GREW UP IN A REMOTE CORNER OF FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA WHERE FORCED LABOR WAS COMMON, BRUTALITY A WAY OF LIFE AND AFRICAN LIFE CHEAP IN THE EYES OF THE RULING POWER. BUT IT WAS AN EFFICIENT AND AN EFFECTIVE SYSTEM. UNLIKE THOSE WHO ECSTATICALLY WENT TO MOSCOW IN THE 30'S AND RETURNED TO PROCLAIM THEY HAD SEEN THE FUTURE AND IT WORKED, BOKASSA HAS SEEN THE PAST AND KNOWS THAT IT WORKS AS WELL. MANY OF THE TECHNIQUES OF HIS REGIME INCLUDING THE USE OF PRISON LABOR, BEATINGS OF PRISONERS, COMPULSORY COTTON PRODUCTION, HE INHERITED FROM THE FRENCH. THE DRILL SARGEANT MENTALITY OF THE FORMER COLONIAL NCO IS STILL A LARGE PART OF THE THINKING OF THE LATTER-DAY FIELD MARSHAL AND EMPEROR. HIS CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND STRONG ANTI-COMMUNISM ARE ALSO OUTGROWTHS OF HIS EXPERIENCE AS A FRENCH ARMY OFFICER.

4. THE OTHER CRITICAL ELEMENT OF BOKASSA'S MAKEUP IS THAT OF AN AFRICAN CHIEF. HE OFTEN SPEAKS WITH PRIDE OF HIS ANCESTRAL

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LANDS AND OF HIS SELECTION BY HIS GRANDFATHER IN 1939 TO HEAD THE MBAKA TRIBE. HE HAS TRANSLATED THE ASSUMPTIONS OF LOCAL CHIEFTAINSHIP INTO A SYSTEM OF NATIONAL RULE. HIS ARBITRARINESS, HIS SUMPTUARY LIFE STYLE, HIS HAREM OF WIVES, HIS ABSOLUTE RIGHT OF PUNISHMENT BUT ALSO OF PARDON AND RECONCILIATION ARE ELEMENTS OF THIS TRADITIONAL RULE. ALTHOUGH HE MAY PAY LIP SERVICE TO HUMAN RIGHTS, IN A FUNDAMENTAL SENSE THEY HAVE NO MEANING TO HIM. THE EMPIRE IS HIS PERSONAL FIEFDOM WHERE HIS DECISIONS ARE FINAL AND HIS POWER ABSOLUTE. HE IS SHREWD ENOUGH TO BEND TO THE WINDS OF CHANGE WHEN THIS SEEMS NECESSARY OR DESIRABLE, BUT SUCH GESTURES ARE TACTICAL AND REPRESENT NO FUNDAMENTAL MODIFICATION IN HIS SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE.

5. ANOTHER FACTOR TO KEEP IN MIND IN DEALING WITH BOKASSA IS HIS RELATIVE LACK OF SOPHISTICATION. HE HAS A SOLDIER'S NOT A STATESMAN'S, EDUCATION. HE IS WILY AND CUNNING BUT HAS LITTLE OF THE TECHNICAL UNDERSTANDING OF AFFAIRS WHICH THE MODERN WORLD REQUIRES. FOR HIM POLITICS IS MANIPULATION OF INDIVIDUALS FOR TRIBAL, PERSONAL AND DYNASTIC ENDS. HE IS A MASTER OF THIS ART, AND HE HAS CREATED A SITUATION IN WHICH THERE ARE NO EVIDENT CHALLENGERS TO HIS RULE. ECONOMICS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ARE MATTERS OF FUND RAISING AND PHYSICAL SYMBOLS.

A FRIEND IS SOMEONE WHO PROVIDES MONEY; A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IS A MONUMENT NOT HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE. THUS THE NEW UNIVERSITY COMPLEX AT BERENGO AND THE OLDER MODEL TOWN AT MONGOUMBA, A SORT OF POTEMKIN'S VILLAGE, ARE THE PROJECTS OF WHICH HE IS MOST PROUD. HE HAS PUSHED OUTSIDERS TO CONSTRUCT NEW BUILDINGS IN BANGUI AND INDEED THERE IS AN AIR OF BUSTLING MODERNITY ABOUT THE TOWN WHICH FOR BOKASSA SIGNIFIES PROGRESS. UNFORTUNATELY, HE CARES FAR LESS FOR THE WELL-BEING OF HIS RURAL MASSES, WHO REMAIN PASSIVE, IGNORANT AND ISOLATED, AND HENCE NO THREAT TO HIS RULE.

6. HOW SHOULD WE DEAL WITH THIS MAN, WHO DEFIES MANY OF THE RULES OF THE MODERN WORLD, WHO SCORNS PARTICIPATORY POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, WHO GOVERNS WITH THE IRON HAND OF A TRIBAL CHIEF,
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DRILLMASTER, SCHOOL TEACHER AND COLONIAL ADMINISTRATOR AND FOR WHOM "L'ETAT C'EST MOI" IS THE GUIDING POLITICAL DICTUM. HAD WE NO INTERESTS IN THE EMPIRE, WE MIGHT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH HIM, WAITING UNTIL TIME HAS ITS WAY AND PEACEFULLY OR VIOLENTLY A NEW LEADER EMERGES IN CENTRAL AFRICA. THIS IS NOT A REAL

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGUI 1280

LIMDIS

TEHRAN FOR FAIRCHILD

OPTION. OUR GROWING INTERESTS IN AND COMMITMENT TO AFRICA, OUR LIMITED INVESTMENTS, OUR RESIDENT POPULATION, AND OUR HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE EMPIRE REQUIRE THAT WE DO BUSINESS WITH BOKASSA. HE, IT MUST BE SAID, WANTS TO DO BUSINESS WITH US.

7. OUR STRATEGY SHOULD IDEALLY BE ONE WHICH INCLUDES BOTH CARROTS AND STICKS. BOKASSA IS ENORMOUSLY VAIN AND SMALL GESTURES OFTEN RECEIVE DISPROPORTIONATE ATTENTION. WHILE WE UNDOUBTEDLY WANT TO AVOID TOO CLOSE PUBLIC IDENTIFICATION WITH HIM AND HIS IDIOSYNCRATIC SYSTEM, WE ALSO SHOULD AVOID GRATUITOUS SNUBS WHICH ARE ONLY LIKELY TO ANGER HIM OR PROVOKE ARBITRARY ACTIONS AGAINST AMERICANS IN THE CAE. AN OFFICIAL VISIT TO WASHINGTON SHOULD NOT BE APPROVED BUT WE SHOULD BE PREPARED TO GIVE HIM A CERTAIN DEGREE OF PERSONAL ATTENTION
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THROUGH OCCASIONAL VISITS FROM SENIOR DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS OR BY MESSAGES ADDRESSED TO HIM DIRECTLY. THE PRESIDENT'S RECENT LETTER ON THE PANAMA CANAL WAS A USEFUL EXAMPLE OF A RELATIVELY NON-SUBSTANTIVE COMMUNICATION WHICH PROVIDED BOKASSA WITH THE PERSONAL RECOGNITION HE SEEMS TO NEED. GESTURES OF THIS KIND CAN, OF COURSE, ALSO BE USED TO PROVIDE AN ENTREE FOR THE DISCUSSION OF SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES. GIVEN THE FACT THAT ALL DECISIONS COME FROM BOKASSA, DIRECT PERSONAL CONTACT AND COMMUNICATION WITH HIM REMAIN THE ONLY SURE WAYS OF FURTHERING MANY OF OUR INTERESTS.

8. EVEN WITH CAREFUL HANDLING OF OUR RELATIONS, HOWEVER, WE SHOULD NOT ASSUME THAT ALL WILL BE SWEETNESS AND LIGHT. BOKASSA CAN LASH OUT UNPREDICTABLY WHEN HE FEELS HIS PERSONAL STANDING IS THREATENED: THE PEACE CORPS AND JOURNALISTS INCIDENTS OF 1977 ARE CASES IN POINT. HE ACTS ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT, OFTEN WITH LIMITED FACTS AT HAND. BECAUSE OF AN UNDERLYING STAIN OF PARANOIA IN HIS MAKEUP, HE IS ALSO LIKELY TO RETURN FROM TIME TO TIME TO CHARGES OF CIA INTERFERENCE IN HIS INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND TO ALLEGATIONS THAT WE ARE TRYING TO OVERTHROW HIM. THESE ALLEGATIONS MUST, OF COURSE, BE PROMPTLY REBUTTED. IN MY EXPERIENCE, AT LEAST, HE ONLY HALF BELIEVES THEM AND USES THEM BOTH TO KEEP US OFF BALANCE AND TO CONVINCE HIS PEOPLE THAT DOMESTIC PROBLEMS ARE OF EXTERNAL ORIGIN. IN ANY EVENT, THESE MOODS USUALLY PASS AND ARE OFTEN SUCCEEDED BY EFFUSIVE EXPRESSIONS OF FRIENDSHIP.

9. WE CAN NOT CHANGE THE MERCURIAL NATURE OF THE MAN. WE CAN

ONLY WORK WITH IT AND AROUND IT. WHAT WE SEEK IN IMPLEMENTING
OUR PROGRAMS IS THE LEAST POSSIBLE INTERFERENCE: IN EFFECT
BENIGN IMPERIAL NEGLECT. FOR WHENEVER BOKASSA INTERVENES, THE

RESULT IS LIKELY TO BE A SKEWING OF OUR PRIORITIES AND A DIVER-
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SION OF OUR RESOURCES. WE DO, OF COURSE, NEED HIS PASSIVE SUPPORT
FOR OUR EFFORTS TO AID THE RURAL POPULATION OF THE CAE.
THIS REQUIRES THAT WE PAY ATTENTION TO THE DYNAMICS OF OUR
PERSONAL, PARTICULARLY AMBASSADORIAL, RELATIONS WITH HIM.
BY ENGAGING HIM IN A FRANK, OPEN DIALOGUE, LACED WITH THE
OCCASIONAL SMALL GESTURE, WE CAN, I AM CONVINCED, MAINTAIN
HIS SUPPORT. HE DOES NOT EGREGIOUSLY SEEK A CONFRONTATION WITH
US. HE, OF COURSE, HOPES TO MANIPULATE US FOR HIS ENDS. HE
HAS DONE SO IN THE PAST. NONETHELESS, IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE FOR
US TO MANIPULATE HIM FOR OUR ENDS. THIS CAN ONLY BE DONE,
HOWEVER, IF WE ARE WILLING TO SEE BOKASSA IN MORE THAN
JOURNALISTIC STEREOTYPES. WE MUST DEAL WITH HIM AS HE IS: A
SHREWD, CRAFTY AND DOMINEERING MAN, BASICALLY FRIENDLY, WHO
IS CAPABLE OF HELPING AND SUPPORTING OUR PROGRAMS AND POLICIES,
BUT WHO IS ALSO CAPABLE OF THWARTING AND HARRASSING AMERICAN

INTERESTS IF HE SO DESIRES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION, TENURE OF OFFICE, EMPEROR
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 jun 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978BANGUI01280
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780241-0080
Format: TEL
From: BANGUI
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780683/aaaactjz.tel
Line Count: 253
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 713d408f-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION AF
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 08 mar 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2444573
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: AMBASSADOR'S RETROSPECTIVE PART 1: BOKASSA -- EMPEROR AND EGOIST
TAGS: PEPR, EAID, PINR, CT, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/713d408f-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014